

TO: WILLIAM LANQUETTE
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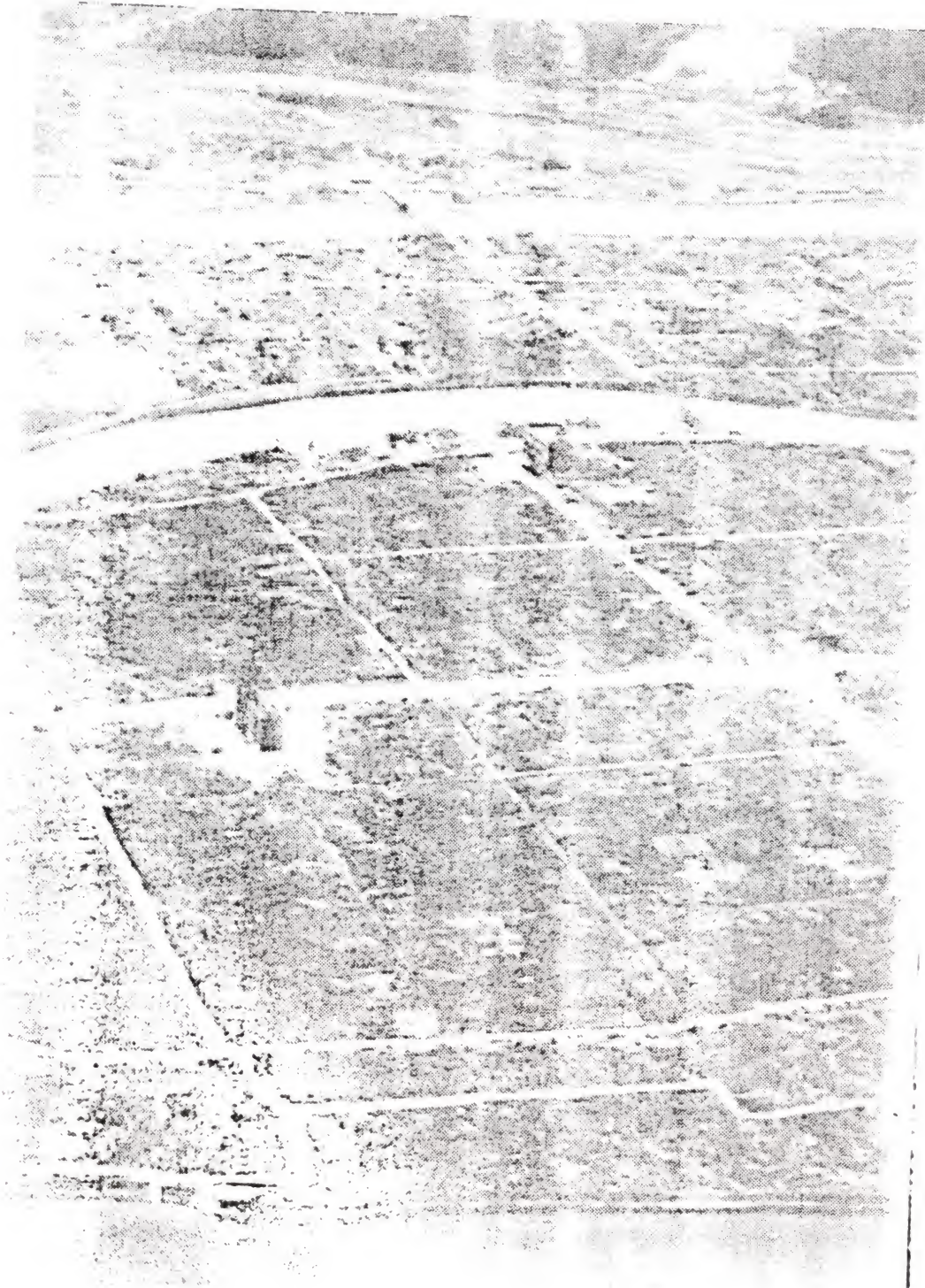
HIROSHIMA

IN AMERICA

FIFTY YEARS
OF DENIAL

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existential, understanding of what we had been making." Wilson was overwhelmed with horror after Hiroshima, and "I still am," he said more than thirty-five years after the fact.

For some, feelings of guilt came later. Nearly forty years after Hiroshima, Seth Neddermeyer (the "father of implosion") confessed that he felt "overwhelmed" by guilt whenever he thought about the atomic bombings. "This is what bugs me more than anything else—I don't remember having any strong feelings about [the bombings] at the time," he explained to a writer, almost in tears. "I guess I just got caught up in the mindless hysteria."

Only one scientist, the British physicist Joseph Rothblat, left the bomb project when it became apparent that Germany would soon surrender and the race for the bomb (which was always one-sided) was over. What prompted his departure, however, was the "disagreeable shock" of hearing first-hand from General Groves (as Rothblat revealed in a little-noted 1985 article) that "the real purpose in making the bomb was to subdue the Soviets." Later he called his entire involvement with the bomb a "traumatic experience . . . Our concepts of morality seem to get thrown overboard once military action starts." Afterward, he refused to work on weapons, choosing instead, he explained, "an aspect of nuclear physics which would definitely be beneficial to humanity: the applications to medicine."

Scientists who tried desperately to prevent the use of the bomb before Hiroshima, such as Leo Szilard and Eugene Rabinowitch, nonetheless felt guilty afterward. Szilard condemned himself not only for working on the bomb but for failing to halt its use. In his parable, "My Trial as a War Criminal," he brought himself to justice (an impulse that recalls the mock trial involving Truman and Churchill). Szilard defended himself, in the fable, by declaring that he had circulated an anti-bomb petition among scientists. But the prosecution pointed out that this had no effect because he foolishly went through the proper channels—where the petition could be quashed—instead of obeying his own impulse to act more radically. And so at the end of the story, Szilard declared himself as guilty as the next scientist.

Eugene Rabinowitch actually considered taking a step Szilard perhaps only fantasized about. During the summer of 1945, haunted by the unstoppable momentum of the decision to use the bomb against Japan, Rabi-

nowitch and some of his colleagues "walked the streets of Chicago," he later wrote, "vividly imagining the sky suddenly lit by a giant fireball, the steel skeletons of skyscrapers bending into grotesque shapes and their masonry raining into the streets below, until a great cloud of dust rose and settled over the crumbling city." This was so unsettling that Rabinowitch, who had already signed Szilard's petition and co-drafted the Franck Report (which also challenged use of the bomb against Japan), considered atomic action. Of all the top scientists who worked on the bomb, only Rabinowitch seriously considered leaking the plan to drop the bomb on a Japanese city to the news media—a shocking breach of security—and spent several sleepless nights pondering it.

But, like Leo Szilard, he failed to make the next, difficult, move—and Szilard, he would regret this failure for the rest of his life. "Twenty years later, I feel I would have been right if I had done so," he revealed in an extraordinary 1971 letter to the *New York Times*. (The letter was inspired by Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War.) On another occasion, Rabinowitch explained that if he had alerted the public they would have at least known in advance of "a crime" it was to be carried out in their name. He harbored no illusions that the American people would have tried to prevent the atomic bombings; more likely, the vast majority would have "enthusiastically favored" it. Still, he affirmed, "they should have been given the opportunity to accept the responsibility for mass murder on an unprecedented scale—of which they would stand guilty before history without having known anything about it beforehand."

After Hiroshima, each of these scientist-survivors attempted to bear witness to the atomic bombings by campaigning for arms control and a nuclear test ban, to keep the weapon from ever being used again. Rothblat helped organize the scientists' movement in England, Wilson directed the formation of American Scientists, Rabinowitch edited the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, and Szilard founded the Council for a Livable World. They had found their survivor meaning in an animating relationship to the world, a capacity to confront the source of that guilt in a manner that could lead to positive action. In that way self-condemnation can be transformed into the anxiety of social responsibility. But the process can be incomplete and erratic, with painful feelings of guilt still finding periodic expression.